B(L)ACK IN FASHION

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Telfar Campaign 2019, System Magazine. Courtesy of Roe Ethridge

The 'Bushwick Birkin'

UGG x TELFAR campaign, 2020. Courtesy of Torso

There are few cultural arenas in which the task of addressing a systemic undervaluing of Black life has been as hysterically played out as fashion. As the Black Lives Matter movement has permeated mainstream social consciousness, we've seen a full gamut of industry publications eagerly populate their pages (and brands their campaigns and billboards) with Black models, designers, musicians, artists, and activists alike—shot by Black photographers, styled by Black stylists, et cetera. That Blackness is allowed to participate in the production of fashion's spectacle, rather than solely existing as a choreographed object within it, is certainly a new development. All the same, it is also symptomatic of an expected acceleration of a cosmetic assimilation of Blackness at the industry's uppermost ranks, a trend that has been developing over the past five or so years, a watershed moment being the appointment of Edward Enninful as editor-in-chief at *British Vogue* in April 2017 and Tyler Mitchell's Beyoncé cover for the American edition's 2018 September issue. These gestures, while noble, are also examples of fashion's cynically reflective nature; of its ambivalent ability to regurgitate progressive social values at the drop of a hat when conscientious fashion consumption couldn't be more chic.

It's not all cause for cynicism, though. As a consequence of this at-times rather ingratiating championing of Blackness by the fashion mainstream, we've witnessed an exponential boom in the number of thriving independent Black-owned fashion businesses, with names like Telfar, Mowalola, Wales Bonner, Pyer Moss, and Bianca Saunders among them. In the interest of brevity, what follows will focus on the former two—though what sets these examples apart for commentary is not simply that they are independent Black-owned businesses. Rather, both exist in collaboration with, in contradiction to, and in spite of, traditional industry frameworks. Each on their own terms, they confidently offer blueprints for the autonomous existence of Blackness in fashion.

Of course, Blackness has long been in fashion—which is to say that Black people have, for a long time, worked in fashion—but its presence within images must not be mistaken for agency over it. The contract under which Blackness has typically been admitted to the fashion mainstream has always been unilateral: Blackness as the grammatical object of the verb "to include". The corner of the industry where this is best exemplified is, of course, modelling, a field in which attempts at diverse representation have seldom advanced past the first degree, beginning and ending with quantifiable, optical representation. It is only with the arrival of a new generation of Black supermodels with staunch identity agendas—Adut Akech, Adesuwa Aighewi and Paloma Elsesser among them—that we've started to see change in this respect. Flick through a proverbial catalogue of ostensibly pioneering moments in this respect and it will, almost invariably, focus on editorials (*Vogue Italia*'s July 2008 'Black Issue'; Naomi Campbell's 1988 *Vogue* Paris cover), campaigns (Oliviero Toscani's Benetton advertisements in the early 90s) and the early catwalks of French designers like Jean-Paul Gaultier and Yves Saint Laurent. "Diversity? Saint Laurent was among the first designers to embrace black models on the runway," writes Vanessa Friedman in a rosy 2016 obituary of the last *grand couturier* titled "Yves Saint Laurent, Who Changed the Color of Couture".[01] This is certainly true: Fidelia modelled for Saint Laurent as 1962, and "many black models wore the heart signaling Saint Laurent's favorite model for each collection," according to a statement published on the website of the Fondation Pierre-Bergé-Yves-Saint-Laurent in Paris.[02] Friedman goes on to cite Iman, Katoucha Niane and Dalma Callado among the girls to whom he opened the door. She fails, however, to address that Saint Laurent's appreciation for the Black women he cast more closely resembled *pied noir* exoticism than a gesture towards Black empowerment or emancipation. "Yves Saint Laurent never had any ulterior motives. He truly appreciated black women's bodies, their way of moving -- he loved them," explained the couturier's late life and business partner Pierre Bergé in a 2014 interview at the opening of the *Femmes berbères du Maroc* exhibition at the Fondation.[03] Saint Laurent's appreciation of Blackness is thus exposed as a surface fascination; an obsession with Black bodies as exotic marionettes in a fashionable puppet theatre rather than as agents of their own making. And there's a further nuance here that bears noting. Exotic as these living, breathing Black images may have appeared, never were they too foreign. In their slender, statuesque beauty, they were still recognisably in line with a beauty standard set by and for their white counterparts. What we see here is Blackness styled with upper-middle-class white acceptability in mind.

Fashion's tactics of "including" Blackness have, of course, become more sophisticated since, though no less objectifying. An archetype of the corporate land grab for subversive, "authentic" brand identities of the early 90s, Tommy Hilfiger's effective monopolisation of hip hop culture exemplifies an even more parasitic commodification of Blackness. Starting life as a brand of the same preppy stock as Ralph Lauren and Brooks Brothers, the brand consciously skewed its aesthetic upon recognition of the aspirational cachet it held among the Black hip hop community, accommodating a Blackness associated with subversion, bravado, protest and fearlessness. Hilfiger actively courted and dressed artists including Snoop Dogg, Aaliyah and Destiny's Child in the brand's loudly branded garments—an oversized rugby jersey, a bandeau top and tricolor jeans, and similar tops with blue denim bottoms

01 Vanessa Friedman, "Yves Saint Laurent, Who Changed the Color of Couture" in The New York Times, August 1st, 2016. → nytimes.com

02 "1967 – The Spring-Summer African Collection" → museeyslparis.com

03 Roger Maveau, "Yves Saint Laurent et sa passion africaine" in jeuneafrique. → jeuneafrique.com

respectively—inextricably bonding its logo with the visual legacies of these then-rising stars. "Tommy Hilfiger designs also soon began to mimic the rappers' styles," writes Chavie Lieber in a 2019 piece for Business of Fashion titled, "How Tommy Hilfiger Thrived on Hip Hop (Without Being Accused of Cultural Appropriation)", a title she abruptly contradicts in the following sentence: "He took cues from other brands that were popular amongst rappers during the '90s; most notably FUBU and Cross Colours, both brands created by black designers."[04]

"Because he built a strong relationship with African American artists, placing them front and centre in his marketing efforts, experts say Hilfiger is an example of someone who has figured out how to navigate the thorny issue of fashion and race," Lieber continues.[05] Who these experts are and the credentials that enable such assured testimony are not, apparently, public information, but Lieber's statement that Hilfiger relied on placing Blackness "front and centre in his marketing efforts" makes its own point. Under Hilfiger, Blackness, specifically it's fetishised history of fearlessness, resistance and anti-establishment struggle, is hijacked to help make products more appealing on the shop shelf—an economic logic that ultimately benefits white fashion authors and entrepreneurs, while Blackness remains a mere commodity.

It's a marketing logic that we're seeing reproduced, albeit in adjusted form, in today's climate of Black uprising. Take a look, for example, at Valentino's SS19 couture show, featuring an exclusively Black cast—quite the volte-face from the house's SS16 campaign, which saw cornrowed white models shot in Kenya, wearing "Africa-inspired" clothes described in the press release as "primitive" and "wild." In this couture show, Blackness undergoes an upcycling process: it's admitted through filtration, detached from its original context, and reformulated so as to be made palatable for milieus of paler hues and higher social standing. This does, though, speak to a proud truth: to these audiences, *Blackness is hot*! In fact, never before has its currency been more highly valued. Across the consumer spheres of fashion, music, and entertainment, Blackness is glamorized and celebrated like never before, even (or *especially*) the image of Black Uprising. The exchange rate, however, remains imbalanced, with the value of the cheque and the exposure earned still falling short of the value to be gained by the fashion institutional partner to which you lend your image for the explicit purpose of selling product.

"One of my qualms with 'street fashion' or 'high-end fashion,' is the fact that the place it is coming from or the person that it is referencing, isn't even allowed to be in its presence!" says Telfar Clemens, founder of the eponymous independent New York label, to Hilfiger in a 2020 interview published in *System Magazine*, in a passage where the pair discuss what they "dislike about fashion right now."[06] Indeed, as those familiar with Telfar will know, placing the person that the brand is referencing at the heart of its output is key to its modus operandi. Who that person is, exactly, is an intentional paradox. As it's much-cited slogan "Not For You, For Everyone" is often taken to suggest, that person is everyone, with you included. In the brand's imagery and messaging, that person is often Clemens himself. This is neatly set out in the first line of a post on the brand's Instagram dated June 10th, an effective brand manifesto for the brand's practice:

> ***"BECOME A QUEER, BLACK 18 YEAR OLD, AND TRAVEL BACK TO 2004 AND ESTABLISH A 100% NON-GENDERED FASHION LINE OUT OF YOUR FAMILY APARTMENT IN LEFRAK CITY, QUEENS."*** [07]

Here, Telfar the brand employs Clemens' biography as a proxy to assert itself as a label by and for the Other, defining itself against dominant industry narratives that exalt whiteness, binary gender and sexual identity, overnight success, Manhattan roots, etc. In placing the designer's experience of marginal existence at the heart of the brand narrative, Telfar is proposed as a space of alterity in which Clemens acts as a stand-in for anyone else who, too, has experienced exclusion from spaces governed by the orthodox fashion system.

It is, in many respects, a conscious mirroring of Hilfiger's strategy, a flaunting of the same tropes of marginality and subversion that make Blackness an attractive commercial proposal even for Black-owned brands. But what distinguishes Telfar from this cynical mining of Black cultural capital, however, is not only the fact that the brand's founder is a product of the social context of which it speaks—it demonstrates a savvy self-awareness of the commercial reality of the game it's playing. The text contained in the post in question, initially made at the height of the Black Lives Matter protest in New York, ostensibly reads as an earnest statement of the brand's values. The post's caption both contrasts and vindicates any such suspicions:

> ***"OK????? UNDERSTAND???? THIS IS NOT A CORPORATE ANNOUNCEMENT OF VALUES. THIS IS AN ANNOUNCEMENT THAT: THE BAG IS BACK: IN RED, POOL BLUE, CREAM, YELLOW and PINK!!! AND WE LOVE U."***

In turning a statement of solidarity with a project of racial emancipation into a marketing stunt promoting the brand's hyped it-bag, Telfar reproduces institutional fashion industry tactics of affiliation with social cause in the service of profit.

04 Chavie Lieber, "How Tommy Hilfiger Thrived on Hip Hop (Without Being Accused of Cultural Appropriation)" in Business of Fashion. → businessoffashion.com

05 Ibid

06 System Magazine, "Telfar Clemens, Tommy Hilfiger and the State of American Fashion" in Business of Fashion, June 30th, 2020. → businessoffashion.com

07 instagram.com

In his hands, however, this deployment is both parodistic and earnest, playing out the strategy in its full crass absurdity, while remaining heartfelt in its statement of solidarity.

It's in this respect that Telfar illustrates a potential avenue for autonomously Black fashion practice, parroting tried and tested strategies of converting Black cultural value into material wealth. A physical token of Telfar's case is the brand's rapturously successful vegan leather tote modelled on Bloomingdale's shopping bag—save for a US flag version, it comes in three sizes and 17 monochromatic shades with a debossed Telfar logo, retailing between $150 and $257. Its relatively simplicity and affordability has allowed it to become a portable emblem of the Black and queer-adjecent values du jour, much like a society-member pin or brooch. Accordingly, it's been dubbed, "The Bushwick Birkin," a riff on its status as a conscious riposte to the artificially cultivated exclusivity of Hermès' flagship accessory. Telfar's marketing strategy is not, however, entirely dissimilar to that of the French leather goods house. Just as Hermès fuels demand by perpetuating the myth of its products' exclusivity, Telfar does likewise with the inclusivity of theirs. "The thing that has been fuelling our bag sales, almost making our Telfar bag an It bag, is the fact that the people who can afford to wear it are the people who actually wear it," Clemens tells Hilfiger in the same *System Magazine* interview. "We mirror-image our customer, basically. So, anyone who tags anything to our Instagram, gets reposted. It's almost like making the customer the celebrity, because everyone is a celebrity these days." It's a golden formula, it would seem, even more so given that the bag is primarily sold via the brand's direct-to-consumer platform, where drops sell out within seconds of their release. Despite an ongoing pandemic, which has hit wholesale-reliant businesses especially hard, Telfar is reportedly on track to record 8-figure takings this year.[08]

Similar to most traditional luxury brands, if Telfar's accessories business is where the cash to enable an autonomous Black fashion practice is generated, its ready-to-wear collections are where its creative manifesto of self-determined independence is stated. Looking at the brand's SS20 collection, a meditation on travel and migration, some of the most memorable pieces riff on Jamaica string vests, either elongated or re-interpreted with Telfar's signature asymmetrical shoulder. In a September 2020 profile of Clemens in *The Financial Times*, Adam Wray writes that the designer "had decided to play with an archetype, that of the newly arrived immigrant naïf known in the West African diaspora as a Johnny Just Come. Clemens called it 'you've-just-come-to-this-country kind of styling.'"[09] Of course, the ostensible upcycling of uniquely Black cultural tropes is not novel in itself, but what makes this particular example so noteworthy is its sustained specificity, platforming cultural artefacts plucked from corners of the Black visual imaginary that are so alien to mainstream aspirational fashion contexts. In doing so, Telfar draws a new circle on a fashion industry Venn diagram with an unadulterated, uncompromised vision of Blackness at its centre.

London-based designer Mowalola Ogunlesi communicates her practice with comparable zeal, situating it in contexts that have historically been entirely excluded from mainstream fashion conversation. Her 2017 Central Saint Martins BA graduate collection, *Psychedelic*, effectively proposed a new Black male sexiness, with slender boys clad in low-waisted fitted painted leather trousers, referencing the petrolheads of Lagos—the designer's hometown—and Fela Kuti. In the three years since then, introducing aspects of Blackness that have been either overlooked, stigmatised or intentionally excluded in white-dominated fashion discourse has become the engine of her practice. Where the clothing is concerned, this translates to an unrepentant politicising and sexualising of the Black body, both male and female. Patent leather micro-miniskirts and long-sleeved mesh bra-tops with armpit cutouts, for example, and snow-white leather pieces with "bleeding" bullet wounds at the midriff. But it's in the brand's imagery and communications where its full subversive potential is felt. In a recent tweet[10] on what's both a personal and brand account, the brand's quickly viral trucker cap is seen atop a mannequin head toting a synthetic wig, a row of similar mannequin heads behind it. The context of the image is immediately familiar to any Black viewer living in a major Western city as one of the countless Afro-Caribbean hair and beauty stores that punctuate high streets in neighbourhoods with sizable diaspora populations. Rather than seek to "elevate" the product, Mowalola's branding strategy relies on embracing and embodying Blackness in its full Otherness, revelling in Black existence at its most spectacular and most mundane.

Where performing spectacle is concerned, this is done with aplomb. The brand places the most fetishised tropes of Blackness at the forefront of its official imagery—Black as fearless; Black as subversive; Black as hypersexual—taking full ownership of them and bringing them into play entirely on their own terms. There's *Silent Madness*, a six-minute short that sees musician Yves Tumor take an unfortunate trip;[11] early-00s MTV-style clips of Ogunlesi and Lagos-based musician Deto Black wearing the brand's skimpier leather looks, with plenty of upskirt panty shots to boot;[12] and a campaign that see Ogunlesi and a model slinging their purses at one another in a performance of the "handbags at dawn"-stereotype perpetuated by the presentation of young Black women on reality TV programmes like *Bad Girls Club*.[13] Against the backdrop of a fashion culture whose inclusion of Blackness has historically predicated on its ostensible "refinement", Mowalola offers a sketch for a fashion ecosystem in which Blackness, specifically Black womanhood, is able to simultaneous exist within and parodically controvert the *déclassé* frameworks.

TELFAR DRAWS A NEW CIRCLE ON A FASHION INDUSTRY VENN DIAGRAM WITH AN UNADULTERATED, UNCOMPROMISED VISION OF BLACKNESS AT ITS CENTRE.

If we are to argue that either Telfar or Mowalola proposes any sort of blueprint for true Black autonomy in fashion, a feature that must be underscored is the key role that their respective namesake designers play in their visual communication strategies. A retort to the casting of Black bodies as flat object-things à la Saint Laurent, and to the homogenisation and commodification of Black cultural expression in the manner of Tommy Hilfiger, both Clemens and Ogunlesi consciously co-opt and inhabit these readymade tactics of Black representation. By stepping into the arena themselves, they collapse the typically strict boundaries of a brand, its figurehead and the bodies that represent it, offering an immanent critique of the entrenched processes by which the raw material of Black bodies is converted into cash. This may, at first glance, seem somewhat counterintuitive, implying that any path to Black self-determination is paved with acts of self-pimping—that it's simply a case of Black bodies taking ownership of their value as objects of fetish, mindfully engaging with their status as commodities to be consumed. While the fashion business formulae they employ are indeed prearranged, it's what Telfar and Mowalola put into them, and the audiences to whom the output is directed, that takes them beyond that. Whether Telfar's passing of queered Americana and QTPOC advocacy through the prism of a merch drop strategy rather reminiscent of VF Corporation-owned Supreme's, or Mowalola's hearty embrace of chintzy Y2K-era MTV clichés of Black femininity, reimagining them in bright, luxurious leathers in a process that calls early Vetements collections to mind, both directly invoke people who look, think and experience life like them. In the cases of both brands, the end result is a reverse image of a fashion culture that has treated Black bodies as objects to be consumed rather than thinking subjects to be catered to, their subsequent appeal among the white audiences to which fashion has historically addressed itself becoming an incidental, if expected, consequence, rather than an engineered effect. Whether either offers a critical and commercial strategy that can realistically be emulated is something that only time will tell. In both cases, however, what can already be observed is that if Black autonomy in fashion is a truly feasible prospect, it will not be a product of the notions of racial "diversity" and "inclusion" so adamantly marketed by the mainstream fashion institution. Rather, it will come of Black bodies no longer allowing themselves to serve as stocks whose value hinges on industry caprices and speculative trends. Black must never again be "*back*" in fashion, as a tagline on the cover of *Elle Germany*'s November 2019 edition read. Black must *be* in fashion—on its own terms, and for its own sake.

08 Adam Wray, "Telfar is rewriting the rules of 'It' bags" in Financial Times, September 10th, 2020. →.ft.com

09 Ibid

10 Twitter.com

11 instagram.com

12 instagram.com

13 instagram.com